

# Strictly Speaking

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## **2 ADDRESS BEFORE THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB**

ANTHONY J. PRINCIPI  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

## **9 CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY ON VA PREPAREDNESS**

ANTHONY J. PRINCIPI  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

## **20 9-11 REMEMBRANCE CEREMONY REMARKS**

ANTHONY J. PRINCIPI  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

## **22 CLAIMS TASK FORCE REPORT ACCEPTANCE REMARKS**

ANTHONY J. PRINCIPI  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

## **26 WORLD PEACE LUNCHEON REMARKS**

DR. LEO S. MACKAY, JR.  
Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs

## **32 CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY ON VA MEDICAL RESPONSE TO WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION**

FRANCES M. MURPHY, M.D., M.P.H.  
VA Deputy Under Secretary for Health

## **37 ADDRESS TO PEARL HARBOR SURVIVORS**

ROBIN HIGGINS  
VA Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs

**Anthony J. Principi**  
**Secretary of Veterans Affairs**  
**Address before the National Press Club**  
Washington, D.C.  
November 6, 2001

Good Morning, and thank you for that kind introduction.

Last week, over 2.7 million disabled veterans received a disability compensation check from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

On any given day, over 56,000 veterans are inpatients in VA medical facilities or nursing homes and over 107,000 veterans will receive medical care on an outpatient basis.

Each working day, VA will guarantee over 700 home loans for veterans entering the ranks of America's homeowners.

This year, almost 400,000 veterans will attend school on the GI Bill and almost 64,000 disabled veterans will receive vocational rehabilitation training to prepare them for civilian careers.

This year, eighty-eight thousand veterans will be laid in honored rest in one of VA's 120 National Cemeteries.

VA's 4.9 million life insurance policies make it the fourth largest insurer in the nation, and our \$570 billion in coverage provides a bedrock of financial security for veterans' families.

These facts reflect our nation's gratitude for the service of millions of men and women who returned to civilian life after serving our nation in uniform.

**The first duty of any society is to provide for the safety and security of its people. In a world of conflicting interests and values, conflict is an unpleasant but inescapable reality.**

**Even pacific nations require warriors for their defense.**

The consequences of war are vast, even for the victors. Not the least of those consequences are found in the ranks of those who return from the battlefield to the society they served. These men and women endure hardship and risk in our nation's defense.

Veterans' benefits evolved from the need to distribute sacrifice and prosperity more fairly between those who serve and those who remain behind and to mitigate the actual wounds and injuries of service.

These benefits ensure that veterans are treated equitably and that our peace and prosperity do not come at the expense of service members' futures and lives.

In addition, all of us benefit when service members make a successful transition to civilian lives and our nation can take full advantage of the unique attributes (discipline, motivation, teamwork, skills) veterans acquire during military service.

In the early agrarian days of our Republic, patriotism, supplanted by grants of land, generally served that purpose.

The Congress frequently awarded pensions long after the conflict as veterans enter the ranks of the aged.

The World War I veterans' "Bonus March" during the Great Depression was a wakeup call that a relatively passive response approach to returning veterans would no longer suffice in an industrial age.

During World War II, Congress responded with what has come to be known as the GI Bill of Rights. That legislation, combined with the drive and talent of the sixteen million Americans who served during World War II transformed America in revolutionary ways.

Scenarios of alternate histories are by their nature speculation, but I think it fair to say that much of what we now think of as normal in middle class America is rooted in those GIs and the veterans' benefits they used to create new lives for themselves and a new country for all of us.

The World War II GI Bill ensured that every veteran, be they rich or poor, could attend the best schools to which they could be admitted.

The promise of higher education, limited only by ability and ambition, unleashed a generation of men and women and transformed both America and Americans' expectations for ourselves.

**Prior to World War II it was difficult to purchase a home on credit. The GI Bill changed all that, and in doing so created suburban America.**

**The effects of that transformation have been revolutionary — to our economy, to our environment, to our society.**

In 1946, the VA healthcare system entered into a partnership with America's medical schools that revolutionized medical education and research.

It is estimated that 40% of the physicians practicing today received at least part of their training in the VA healthcare system.

VA pioneered the development of clinical psychology. VA medical research led the way to successful treatment for tuberculosis. VA researchers developed some of the earliest drugs for the treatment of schizophrenia and hypertension. VA played a central role in the development of the CAT scan.

Two researchers have been awarded Nobel prizes for their work with VA. In partnership with NASA, one VA researcher took her work into orbit as an astronaut.

I believe the VA/Medical School partnership, born in 1946, set the stage for today's enormous Federal commitment to medical education and research.

In many ways, veterans have been the point men in the revolutionary expansion of Federal involvement in the lives of Americans.

Congress, the American people, and America's universities looked at what the GI Bill provided and liked what they saw. Veterans' education benefits led the way to Federal financial assistance for higher education. Congress, the American people, and America's real estate industry looked at what the GI Bill provided for veterans, liked what they saw, and created today's housing finance industry with widely available low or no down payment mortgages.

Our nation's debt to veterans is clear.

And Congress responded with a comprehensive package of benefits and services. But veterans' laws are but words on a page until made real by the men and women embodying the Department of Veterans Affairs.

We face many daunting challenges in transforming the words of statute into the benefits and services veterans seek when they turn to us for help.

All too often, veterans wait too long when they seek VA medical care. All too frequently they wait too long for an answer when they seek compensation for their disabilities.

The laws defining service-connected disability compensation are generous. They are complex, and they provide veterans with multiple points of access to the claims process. Open access and broad definitions reflect the will of the American people and the Congress. They also impose an obligation on VA to make extraordinary efforts to provide veterans with the accurate, timely decisions they earned.

Frankly, we do not now meet that standard today.

Today, our backlog is over 650,000 cases and the average claim takes over nine months to decide.

President Bush directed me to declare war on our backlog and on our delays and I have done so. We have added nearly 1300 new employees since January to process claims. A new "Tiger Team" is focused on the oldest claims of America's oldest veterans. We are working with the National Archives to speed our access to old records.

I commissioned a Claims Processing Task Force to evaluate our work processes and standards and am very pleased with their report. I expect to see implementation plans for many of the recommendations by the end of next week.

VA employees work very hard. But, I want us to do more than work hard, I want us to work smarter.

Veterans also face delays when they seek VA medical care. In this case, I believe they are the victims of our success.

Today's VA is not your father's VA.

We are consistently in the first rank of quality healthcare providers. In fact, VA's innovations in patient safety have been cited by the Institute of Medicine as a standard for the nation. Quality improvements, coupled with greater access due to changes in law, and the aging of the World War II and Korean War cohort of veterans, led to dramatic increases in the number of veterans seeking VA care.

Increased demand for VA care presents us with many challenges.

First, VA care is not an entitlement.

All twenty-five million veterans are eligible for VA care, but none are entitled. The Congress gives us a fixed appropriation and we care for as many veterans as possible. We have responded to this challenge with dramatic improvements in the cost effectiveness of the care we provide.

From 1994 to 2000, the number of patients treated has increased from 2.9 million to 3.8 million while the number of operating hospital beds declined from 53,000 to 22,000. The

number of outpatient visits increased from 26.2 million to 39.3 million. Between 1990 and 1998, Medicare cost per patient increased 54% while VA increased only 22%.

Much of this improvement is the product of our transformation from an inpatient-hospital-focused system to a patient-centered system emphasizing outpatient care.

However, the easy changes are now completed.

Future improvements will be more difficult even as they become even more necessary under the pressure of constrained appropriations.

GAO has testified that VA spends a million dollars a day maintaining unneeded or obsolete infrastructure.

We have embarked on a program to improve our care and increase access by rationalizing our legacy infrastructure so that it matches the infrastructure needs of twenty-first century medicine and the demographics of the twenty-first century veteran population.

However, one person's "efficiency" is another person's "cut". We will be challenged to ensure that skeptics among the veterans we serve, their representatives in Congress, our affiliated medical schools, and our own employees understand that hospital beds and quality medical care are not synonymous.

That protecting beds for beds' sake can come at the cost of quality and access to care.

We are also aggressively protecting the quality of our care and expanding access by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of our operations.

In addition to improvements in operations, I am working for increased savings in procurement.

We simply have to ensure that we reap the maximum benefit from the billions of dollars we spend to purchase supplies and equipment.

In the long run, America must face the challenges of the aging baby boom generation.

VA faces the same challenges today in the aging World War II generation of veterans.

And again, VA is setting the pace for America.

VA's innovations in non-institutional long-term care and end-of life care have the potential to revolutionize how our society meets the challenges of an exploding population of the very old.

In a world of steadily increasing health care costs, VA's efforts to maximize the amount

of healthcare it can deliver on a fixed budget have the potential to set the pace for the cost-effective delivery of quality health care.

In a world increasingly conscious of the possible health effects of the chemicals we introduced into our environment, VA's efforts to come to grips with the expectations of veterans who may have been exposed to radiation or herbicides have lessons to teach decision makers in both government and commerce.

As we leave this room, I ask each of you to reflect on the likelihood that reporters and editors would be free to openly discuss and report questions of public policy were it not for the millions of men and women who responded to our Nation's call to arms.

Our debt to the Private Ryans who avenged Pearl Harbor and extinguished the scourge of Nazi Germany is clear and incalculable. But, our debt does not end there. In the half-century after World War II, millions of young men and women entered our Nation's armed forces and served on the front lines of freedom.

The wars in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and now Central Asia are "little wars" only in comparison to the global war of World War II or to the World War III we did not fight.

I would argue that the legacy of the generations of veterans whose service deterred global war is measured in the intensity and openness of debate on any issue you might choose to report, in this city or in any part of our country.

That legacy lives on.

In the wake of a terrorist attack on innocent civilians that killed more Americans than died at Pearl Harbor, American service members are responding to the President's call to "bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies".

Nor does Operation Enduring Freedom define the boundaries of our debt to the men and women now on active duty.

Today, as we enjoy our lunch and contemplate whatever policy questions our respective callings place before us, I remind you that it is night on the Korean DMZ. And some GIs are now standing a cold and lonely watch to deter the garrison state that may be the world's last legacy of Stalinism from plunging the world once again into war.

This afternoon, as we go about our business, sailors and airmen will be on duty in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea, standing by to ensure the free flow of the oil necessary to fuel the economy upon which all America depends. This evening, as we go to bed, soldiers will be waking up in the Balkans to another day of stabilizing the cauldron from which the winds of

war have all too often enveloped first Europe and then the United States.

**Today, as in every day, the men and women who embody our nuclear deterrent are standing watch over the world. Their very presence ensuring that they will never have to fight the unimaginable battles for which they are trained. All day, every day, the men and women of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard do their duty.**

**Every service member has made an unlimited commitment to our country. The Department of Veterans Affairs has been entrusted with the mission of transforming our nation's reciprocal commitment to them into the reality of the benefits and services they will need when they return to civilian life.**

**The midwives of our 225 year-old national experiment in democracy were the men of the Revolutionary Army. The revolution they set in motion continues today and, just as it did then, depends upon the willingness of individual Americans to put country ahead of self. I believe that we must honor their commitment with a reciprocal commitment to take whatever steps are necessary to welcome them back to civilian life when they exchange their uniforms for civilian clothes and assume the honored title of "veteran".**

I hope our discussion today will help increase your understanding and support for this vital mission.

Thank you.

**Statement of Anthony J. Principi**  
**Secretary of Veterans Affairs**  
**Before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs**  
**VA's Ability to Respond to DoD Contingencies and National Emergencies**  
**October 15, 2001**

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the opportunity to testify before the committee on VA's preparedness to perform its missions under the conditions of military conflict abroad and terrorist attacks at home. I am accompanied by Dr. Frances Murphy, VA's Deputy Under Secretary for Health; Mr. James Farsetta, Director of the VA New York/New Jersey Healthcare System; and Mr. John J. Donnellan, Director of the VA New York Harbor Healthcare System.

My testimony will cover four significant areas:

- how VA responded on, and in the days following, September 11;
- VA's emergency response missions;
- the challenges facing VA; and
- the actions we are taking in response to those challenges.

Mr. Chairman, I will take this opportunity to again thank all VA employees for their efforts – whether they have been directly involved or have been a part of local VA and community efforts – in responding to the needs of victims and their families in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. I particularly want to commend VA staff in the immediate areas for their efforts to continue serving veterans in very difficult circumstances and beyond this – to support community, family and victim assistance efforts in New York, New Jersey, and at the Pentagon.

VA operates the largest integrated national health care system in the country and with our 1200 sites nationwide, provides direct care benefits and memorial services in every state. We expect that this national resource will be called on to provide significant assistance should mass casualty situations arise. We have responded well in this circumstance and are prepared to provide assistance to the Department of Defense should the need arise. We are reexamining our plans and will be taking steps to strengthen them. We also stand ready to assist Governor Ridge and our other federal partners in the weeks ahead as they strengthen the Nation's ability to prevent and respond to any future terrorist attack.

**VA's Response to the Events of September 11**

Veterans Health Administration

VA reacted very quickly to the events of September 11, 2001. Immediately following the second aircraft crash into the World Trade Center, the VA Continuity of Operations Plan

(COOP) was activated. Alternate sites, which serve as command centers and give VA leadership the ability to manage a crisis in the event VA's headquarters is closed down, were operational and key personnel were deployed within a few hours.

While staff in the Central Office assured the continuity of operations, the Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN) 3 and 5 command centers were activated. VISN 4 provided support to the response following the downed aircraft in Pennsylvania. VA staff supported the special security mission during the President's address to the Nation.

In New York, VA was dealing with the greatest national tragedy to touch our shores in a very immediate way, caring for patients, managing emergent situations, heightening security, deploying staff, sharing inventory, assuring continuous communications, all very close to ground zero. It should be noted that in New York nearly every person in the VA family has been affected in some personal way by the tragedy. Some VA staff work so close to where the World Trade Centers stood that they watched the entire catastrophe unfold before their eyes. Some staff had loved ones and close friends in the towers who haven't come home.

While the wounded were few, they were significant, and VA facilities in New York provided much needed supplies to the emergency workers and the National Guard to help them carry out their jobs in the immediate aftermath. VA continues to provide medical support to 3,000 members of the National Guard who are providing security to the city and its critical infrastructure. The Network's centralized kitchen and laundry operations worked miracles in keeping food and clean linens stocked at all of our medical centers in New York and New Jersey, fighting bridge and tunnel closures, rigorous inspection stops and using VA Police escorts to get around town and into the suburbs. Whereas many businesses and hospitals in the city were without telephone communications, our team had telephones continuously up and working.

Since the tragedy, VA outreach teams have been staffing family and victim assistance centers around the city and in New Jersey. We are now gearing up for the emotional and traumatic impact this event is likely to generate in the weeks and months ahead. The mental health team across the network is reaching out to those who are at risk.

As a part of VA's support of civilian emergencies under the Federal Response Plan, two VA critical care burn nurses were deployed to Cornell Medical Center Burn Unit and four critical care burn nurses were deployed to the Washington Hospital Center Burn Unit in Washington, DC to augment their staffs.

On the Saturday following the terrorist attacks, staff from VA's National Center for PTSD arrived in Virginia to assist DoD in its relief efforts at the Pentagon. They provided education for counselors and debriefing and psychoeducational support for relief staff that included Red Cross personnel and DoD Casualty Assistance Officers. Among the tools they created for assisting the relief workers were a Debriefing Facilitators Manual, an evaluation

questionnaire for Casualty Assistance Officers, and a computerized self-assessment for the Army Community Support Center staff.

Within days following the event, VA broadcast the Department of Defense-sponsored series on "Medical Management of Biological and Chemical Casualties", throughout the VA system using the VA's Knowledge Satellite Network. In addition, a nationwide satellite videoconference on "Medical Response to Chemical and Biological Agent Exposure" will be broadcast to VA facilities on October 16, 2001, followed by "Medical Response to Radiological Agent Exposure" in November.

## **Veterans Benefit Administration**

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has had an active role in administering benefits to veterans and their families affected by the events of September 11. The New York Regional Office (NYRO) has been very involved in helping the survivors and family members affected by the World Trade Center disaster, while the Washington Regional Office (WRO) and personnel from VBA Headquarters have been supporting the Department of Defense in providing assistance to family members of the victims of the attack on the Pentagon.

On September 17, VBA established an information, assistance, and on-site processing unit at DoD's Family Assistance Center. The Washington Regional Office, along with VA headquarters staff, are providing the coverage for this unit and VA's Insurance Center in Philadelphia and each of the benefits programs within VBA are supporting them.

The New York Regional Office (NYRO) established a team of employees who are providing help at the New York City Family Assistance Center, located at Pier 94. Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, Loan Guaranty, and Veterans Benefits and Services Divisions developed alternate plans to provide counseling, to close home loans, and to interview veterans at off-site locations. Telephone calls about benefits issues were rerouted to other Regional Offices until the NYRO toll-free service was restored.

In an effort to ensure control and efficient, effective service to the survivors of this terrible tragedy we issued a letter to each of our field stations outlining procedures for handling all claims related to the attack. All claims processing for this initiative has been centralized to our Compensation and Pension Service at Headquarters.

We have also established a toll-free telephone number for the survivors, families of the victims, and DoD Casualty Assistance Officers to obtain information about benefits and services offered by VA. They are being notified of this special number in a letter that VBA is sending to each of the affected families. In addition, VA's web site offers information on benefits and services available to the survivors.

We have streamlined the claims process as much as possible in an effort to be as supportive as possible of the families at this difficult time. Working with DoD, we have obtained direct online access to the Defense Eligibility and Entitlement Records System (DEERS) to obtain data on dependents allowing us to conduct on-site claims processing. We are faxing claims for Servicemembers Group Life Insurance (SGLI) directly to the Office of SGLI in Newark where the claims are processed within 24 hours. We have also implemented similar procedures for processing burial claims and headstone or marker applications.

I am pleased to say that both DoD and the families have indicated appreciation for the support and services we have been able to offer in this very difficult time.

## **National Cemetery Administration**

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) was quick to respond to the events of September 11, 2001. After news of the terrorist attacks was received and the alternate site was activated, the NCA Continuity Of Operations (COOP) team was there to participate fully in guaranteeing that VA was able to continue meeting its missions.

As long as the COOP was activated, NCA was an active participant in the One VA effort to guarantee that key functions were carried out. For NCA, this included making decisions concerning burials for victims of the attacks. NCA remained sensitive to the needs of their families during this crisis, making accommodations wherever possible. All VA national cemeteries were directed to treat all VA burials resulting from this tragedy as high priority, and to honor requests for weekend burials and to extend hours, if necessary.

All national cemeteries remained operational with the exception of Ft. Rosecrans and Barrancas National Cemeteries, which, because of the attacks, were temporarily closed for burials. This was a result of the proximity of the cemeteries to military bases with restricted access. This interruption in service lasted only a short time and all burials scheduled before the attacks were successfully rescheduled and completed.

It was reported that there had been cancellations of military funeral honors by the Department of Defense. Cemetery Directors were urged to seek alternate honors approaches, including the use of cemetery representatives and/or other employees or additional Veteran Service Organization assistance if possible.

NCA has provided or scheduled burials for 15 victims in its national cemeteries, with three additional requests having been made but services not yet scheduled. We immediately provided Presidential Memorial Certificates (PMC) to the families of over 75 active-duty personnel or veterans killed on September 11. PMCs bear the President's signature and commemorate a person's honorable service to the Nation. NCA has begun to provide a headstone or marker for several victims. In those cases where remains are unrecoverable, we will be able to provide a memorial marker in lieu of an actual burial.

NCA will continue to meet the burial needs of the victims of this horrendous act in a compassionate manner.

In short, VA's response to the attacks was swift, orderly, and effective. And that response is consistent with VA's history of being there in times of great need.

### **VA's History of Disaster Response**

We are proud of our history of responsiveness to local and national disasters. The list is too long to include all our efforts, but just within the past 12 years, we have compiled a notable record of service in times of crisis. For example:

In 1989, as aftershocks of the October 17 earthquake continued to rock Northern California, VA opened the doors of its San Francisco and Martinez Medical Centers to supplement local emergency medical activities. Employees of the San Francisco VAMC staffed a mobile health-screen clinic that was deployed to area homeless shelters, and VA personnel were on hand at 17 federal disaster centers in the area.

When Hurricane Hugo struck Puerto Rico and the Eastern U.S. in 1989, VA facilities took direct hits, but their preparations enabled them to recover quickly and get to the business of helping their neighbors with services and shelter.

VA was ready in Florida in 1992 after Hurricane Andrew, and we quickly deployed to serve veterans and their communities stunned by that overwhelming disaster.

Even before the waters of the devastating 1993 Midwest floods receded, VA was helping veterans cope with the damage by instituting fast-response, one-day approval and processing of home-loan insurance issues, and delaying payment dates to allow veterans to recover from the disaster. We did this even though our own offices were flooded and many of our employees were working from home.

### **VA's Emergency Response Mission**

The preceding are vivid examples of the manner in which VA responds to emergencies. The primary responsibilities and authorities governing VA's emergency management efforts include:

- VA and Department of Defense Contingency Hospital System, Public Law 97-174, May 1982, requires VA to serve as the primary contingency back up to the Department of Defense medical services.
- National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) was established in 1984 by agreement between Department of Defense, Department of Health and Human Services, VA, and

Federal Emergency Management Agency. It operates to provide capability for treating large numbers of patients who are injured in a major peacetime disaster within the continental United States, or to treat casualties resulting from a conventional military conflict overseas.

- Federal Response Plan, (updated 1999) implemented Public Law 93-288, the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Assistance Act as amended, and established the architecture for a systematic, coordinated, and effective Federal response to a disaster or emergency situation.
- Executive Order 12656, Assignment of Emergency Preparedness Responsibilities, November 1988, charged VA to plan for emergency health care services for VA beneficiaries in VA medical facilities, active duty personnel, and, as resources permit, to civilians in communities affected by national security emergencies and for mortuary services for eligible veterans and to advise on methods for interment of the dead during national security emergencies.
- Federal Radiological Emergency Response Plan (FRERP) (May 1, 1996) established and organized an integrated capability for coordinated response by Federal agencies to peacetime radiological emergencies. VA's Medical Emergency Radiological Response Team (MERRT) is a federal resource available to respond to radiological emergencies.
- Presidential Decision Directive – 62, Combating Terrorism, May 1998, tasked U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS), working with VA, to ensure that adequate stockpiles of antidotes and other necessary pharmaceuticals are maintained nationwide and to train medical personnel in NDMS hospitals.
- Presidential Decision Directive – 63, Critical Infrastructure Protection (May 22, 1998) tasks VA to develop and implement plans to protect its infrastructure, including facilities, information systems, telecommunications systems, equipment and the organizations necessary to accomplish our mission to provide benefits and services to veterans.
- Presidential Decision Directive – 67, Continuity of Operations (October 21, 1998) tasks all Federal Departments and Agencies, including VA to ensure that their critical functions and operations continue under all circumstances and a wide range of possible threats.

VA works closely with the Federal Emergency Management Agency to ensure compliance with the Continuity of Government and Continuity of Operations requirements in Presidential Decision Directive 67, titled *Enduring Constitutional Government and Continuity of Government Operations*.

VA also supports the Department of Health and Human Services in its mission of providing health and medical response following disasters, including terrorist incidents. In this regard, VA has significant medical assets that could assist the Nation should mass casualties occur. VA operates the Nation's largest integrated health care system; treating almost four million patients per year in hospitals and clinics in every state and Puerto Rico; and employing over 14,000 physicians and 37,000 registered nurses. As a partner in the National Disaster Medical System, VA is involved in planning, coordination, training and exercises to prepare for a variety of catastrophic events.

VA also provides support to the primary departments and agencies identified in Presidential Decision Directive 62, titled *Protection against Unconventional Threats to the Homeland and Americans Overseas*. Our Veterans Health Administration supports HHS's Office of Emergency Preparedness in ensuring that adequate stockpiles of antidotes and other necessary pharmaceuticals are maintained nationwide. Four pharmaceutical caches are available for immediate deployment with a HHS National Medical Response Team in the event of an actual weapons of mass destruction incident. We also maintain a fifth cache that is placed on-site at special high-risk national events, such as the Presidential Inauguration. VA also procures pharmaceuticals for the Centers for Disease Control and the Prevention National Pharmaceutical Stockpile Program.

VA is known worldwide as the authority in treatment of stress reactions and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A vast number of highly skilled mental health staff are available for continuing response to the victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks and to respond to future events that psychologically traumatize our citizens.

VA has recently developed a nationwide registry of VA employees who volunteer and are trained to respond to disasters. In the future this registry will provide an inventory of personnel with skills and experience that can be matched to response requirements for both internal (VA) and external emergencies. VHA is developing a national policy and plan for training and equipping our facilities and staffs to manage victims of a WMD incident. A Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of both VA and non-VA experts was established in early 2000 to advise VA on WMD issues. The plan will include specific precautionary and response measures to be implemented at all VA facilities. We expect to establish a national policy and initiate system wide implementation before the end of 2001.

Public Law 97-174 authorized VA to furnish health care services to members of the armed forces during a war or national emergency. VA and DoD have established contingency plans whereby facilities of the VA healthcare system would provide the principal medical support to the military healthcare system for active duty military personnel when DoD does not have adequate medical resources under its own jurisdiction to meet medical contingencies.

These plans are reviewed and updated annually. This annual review is shared with DoD and a subsequent report is provided to Congress. VA also completes quarterly bed reporting exercises to ensure that procedures are familiar to staff and are ready for implementation on short notice should contingency support become necessary.

### **Emergency Preparedness Working Group**

Although VA has plans in place to meet our critical emergency response missions, we know that there are new threats to America that we must address, and address quickly and effectively.

Given that this new threat is real and potent, I immediately formed a senior-level working group to undertake an assessment of the ability of the VA in its entirety to manage a multi-scenario crisis. This group assessed our ability to carry out our missions in case of a biological, chemical or radiological weapons attack. It also examined our capacity for reconstituting our ability to fulfill our missions, if need be.

This assessment has identified some deficiencies and opportunities to improve our ability to carry out all of our missions in today's environment. The challenges we face do not outweigh our overall strengths, and they do not compromise our primary mission to care for the nation's 25 million veterans. But they do represent challenges we must, and will, deal with quickly and appropriately.

In the following, I will outline some of the challenges that the working group has identified. However, in order to deny terrorists any sort of roadmap, I will avoid mentioning specifics at a public hearing. I will certainly be available to discuss such details with members and staff of this Committee after the hearing.

We are now facing the potential of having to respond to terrorists' attacks in the U.S., of providing contingency support to DoD, as well as continuing to care for our patients. Here are examples of our findings:

1. Some regions of VA's health care system would be hard-pressed if they were required to treat military and civilian casualties of chemical or biological agents in addition to carrying out their primary mission of providing health care to veterans.
2. VA needs to enhance its medical preparedness to respond to casualties from chemical and biological agents by providing training to its health care workers on decontamination procedures, and on diagnosis and treatment of chemical, biological and radiation injuries. VA medical centers are likely to play a crucial role in the initial response to an attack in their area. Yet their inventories of equipment and pharmaceuticals may not be adequate to address medical needs in the critical first hours of an attack, especially one involving chemical agents. As a

result, VA Medical Centers need substantial upgrades to their personal protection gear, equipment, and training.

3. A call-up of Reserve or National Guard units, or a crisis causing staff to be unable to report to work, could result in a significant medical staffing shortage. This is part of the concern raised by Congressman Evans.

4. A major terrorist attack, especially one involving chemical or biological agents, would require a greater amount of post-traumatic stress counseling for military personnel, veterans, their families, VA employees – notably VA medical professionals and support staffs – and civilians. Long deployments of VA mental health staff could also have an impact on our ability to treat veterans.

5. VA's security forces need to be enhanced in numbers and training, both to manage a domestic crisis requiring medical care, and to protect our veteran patients, key personnel, facilities, and systems.

6. As this committee is well aware, we need to do a far better job securing our information and data bases from cyber-terrorism and to ensure that our key data centers are protected and their data back-up systems fully tested.

7. VBA is dependent on the Department of the Treasury to complete our payment process and issue payments. We need a back-up plan and process in the event that this link is inoperable.

8. Our National Cemetery Administration needs a comprehensive back-up plan to address increased interment workload in the event of an emergency.

9. VA needs to strengthen its communications protocols and its coordination efforts with the Department of Defense.

10. There is a need for a more robust VA headquarters Operations Center, for a stronger emergency operations command and control structure, and for a better-defined plan for mobilizing personnel to relocation sites.

11. We must periodically test our ability to respond to any terrorist attack through more training and periodic exercises.

12. Finally, and most importantly, we need to educate our employees and veterans on the realities of chemical and biological agents and how best to protect themselves.

## **New Actions Being Taken**

VA has already begun to meet these challenges. As mentioned above, I immediately formed a working group to conduct a quick, but thorough, review of our readiness. Based on their findings, I have already authorized the following three actions:

First, as you are aware, the VA has the foremost source of medical care assets in the federal government and the largest integrated medical system in the nation. We are enhancing our emergency operations center to keep that system functioning fully in the event of a crisis of any nature. I have ordered this center to institute daily, around-the-clock coverage, with secure data and voice communications links, to closely monitor VA's operational status, and to track the location of essential personnel for mobilization in the event of a crisis. We will also be improving our information technology capability system-wide.

Second, to make sure that we can respond fully in the event of a crisis, I have directed that an immediate review be made of the working group's many recommendations, that those requiring immediate action be identified, and that a fast-track decision be adopted to implement them. VA wants to ensure that it can continue its mission of caring for the nation's veterans, while supporting DoD in case of heavy casualties on battlefields abroad, and supporting FEMA, HHS and CDC and state and local authorities in case of casualties at home. We safeguard, maintain and deliver stockpiles for HHS and CDC and have emergency teams available on call in case of an emergency, particularly one involving biological, chemical or radiological weapons.

We will fully support Governor Ridge in fulfilling the mission of providing for homeland security, even as we continue to serve our nation's veterans. Above and beyond close coordination with the Homeland Security Council, we will continue to support DoD, HHS, CDC, FEMA, and state and local authorities in responding to future threats to our homeland.

## **VA's Future Role**

Mr. Chairman, beyond the measures I have discussed today, VA will, no doubt, be a vital force in America's ability to meet tomorrow's challenges. I envision a VA that participates even more proactively in helping our communities maintain a high-degree of readiness in the event of natural disasters or terrorism on our homeland. Our primary mission will always be to serve America's veterans with honor, to acknowledge their sacrifices on our behalf, and to be there for them as they were there for America. In any discussion of homeland defense, I want to assure the Nation's 25 million veterans that we will stand tall with our federal, state, and local colleagues to protect them, their families, and their communities.

The challenges we have defined in our preparedness assessment will also help us develop emergency response training and medical education opportunities that we can share with our civilian health professionals across America. As you know VA Medical Centers are often allied with medical schools and I believe these partnerships – enhanced by our lessons learned — will help tomorrow’s health care professionals meet the challenges we have talked about today.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my statement. Thank you.

**Anthony J. Principi**  
**Secretary of Veterans Affairs**  
**Remarks at September 11 Remembrance Ceremony**  
**VA Central Office**  
**Washington, D.C.**  
December 11, 2001

Three months ago – to this very moment – our lives changed; our Nation changed; our world changed.

I was in San Diego on that Tuesday morning...it was just after five, and the sun was not yet over the horizon when I turned on the television to a sight that will remain indelibly etched in my memory. The Twin Towers in flames...first one, then the other...then news of the Pentagon attack...the images were overwhelming and shocking.

New York is my hometown...the stuff of my youth is wrapped up in that city; all my boyhood...the memories of a vital, bustling, metropolis of wonderful smells and sights and sounds...was shaped by the spirit of New York.

The sights and sounds on September 11 were nothing like I'd ever imagined.

I have been on a battlefield before, during my service in Southeast Asia – and I have been to Ground Zero – and I can tell you there is little difference between the two in terms of the sheer magnitude of the devastation.

Each one of you has your own, private, recollection of September 11...I know that our building's proximity to the White House, and the view we have of the Pentagon across the river added to the impact that morning had on everyone who was here in Central Office.

VA employees across the nation lost friends in New York, in Washington, and in Pennsylvania – and if we did not know any of the victims personally or professionally, we were nonetheless touched in some way by the sacrifices of the men and women who fell that morning, and we will honor their memories always.

We also were ready to serve those who survived; here and in New York, VA employees stepped up to help in many ways, and I'm proud of this Department's readiness to pitch in and lend our helping hands to the survivors of the attacks.

To every VA employee who was involved in the rescue or recovery efforts, and to every VA employee who donated blood or contributed to the several September 11 funds, or in any other way reached out to the victims – thank you; you define the American spirit of selflessness. That is what Americans do.

In each of America's struggles, heroes have emerged to inspire us and spur us on to outrace defeat.

Firefighters, police officers, rescue crews, doctors, nurses – maybe just the unassuming citizen on the street, or your neighbor, your spouse, or even you – when called to the service of our fellow man do not hesitate, do not weigh the risks. We are Americans. We stand up to be counted, and we do not rest until the job is done.

America's 25 million living veterans and our active-duty servicemen and women – soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Coastguardsmen – set the bar of honor and duty to country high for all Americans, and I believe VA met that high standard of selflessness on September 11.

An important part of VA's mission during wartime is to care for our warriors who have fallen on the field of battle – that is a privileged duty, and though I do fervently pray that we do not have to exercise that obligation, I know VA is ready.

The 219,000 men and women of VA, working in more than 1400 medical centers, regional offices, clinics, and support facilities across the country, stand side-by-side with our active-duty troops now deployed to bring terrorism to ground and to relieve the world of its burden of fear. We recognize and treasure all who have certified their citizenship on the far-flung fields of combat or in the ever-watchful duties of homeland defense.

Let us recommit ourselves to the work that lies ahead – the work VA knows well.

Just as we honor the sacrifices of our Nation's veterans who secured this magnificent land for us – let us honor the memories of the men and women who were sacrificed on September 11 by living our lives to the fullest, by loving our neighbors, by reaching out every day to those in need, and by serving America with the passion of our patriots' dreams.

This holiday season, let us reflect on the true meaning of these holy days — that among life's most precious gifts are freedom and peace, but above all, the love of the one from whom all our blessings flow.

Thank you.

**Anthony J. Principi**  
**Secretary of Veterans Affairs**  
**Remarks on Acceptance of the Claims Processing Task Force Report**  
**VA Central Office**  
**Washington, D.C.**  
October 3, 2001

We are here this morning because VA takes too long to provide accurate decisions on veterans' claims for disability benefits. Our backlog of pending claims is far too large.

Last year, the President promised a top to bottom review of VA claims processing.

At my Senate confirmation hearing, I promised to commission a task force to conduct a highly focused, short-fused review of VA claims processing.

Admiral Dan Cooper and twelve distinguished individuals accepted this challenge.

Today, in presenting this report to me and to Deputy Secretary Mackay, the Task Force redeems the President's promise and fulfills the mission I entrusted to them.

Dr. Mackay and I want to express our very, very deep appreciation to Admiral Cooper and his staff of one, John O'Hara, ... and of course, to the members of the VA Claims Processing Task Force for dedication, perseverance, and outstanding performance in taking on a daunting and vital project.

Every member of this Task Force and its staff, especially Dan Cooper, have committed time, energy, and intellect far above, beyond the call of duty. America's veterans...and very importantly the men and women who today are on active duty who will be called upon to respond to the terrorist act of September 11 will be the beneficiaries of their effort.

Few VA projects have elicited so much attention as has this one.

Throughout the summer, at virtually every stop of a very active speaking schedule, veterans, veterans' service organizations, VA personnel, and news media representatives expressed their keen interest in your mission, in your progress, and in the outcome of your efforts.

The very fact that you performed your mission so quickly and with such focused energy, sent a signal throughout the veteran population and the VA that President Bush and I are absolutely committed to getting to the core of VA's claims processing problems and that we are just as committed to finding and applying solutions.

On Monday, I was at ground zero in New York City. Standing on the rubble under the World Trade Center. No photo or TV image can truly convey the devastation and the horror at the site of the World Trade Center.

I was also at the Family Assistance Center on Pier 94.

As you know, New York's Office of Emergency Management was located in the World Trade Center and was destroyed.

Mayor Gulliani immediately directed the establishment of an alternate center to coordinate recovery and relief operations and to provide direct services and support to the rescue workers and families of the victims.

Starting from scratch, 24 hours later it was in place and working.

Three football field's worth of interconnected working computers, supplies, communications, supporting teams of Federal, state and local, military and civilian workers providing direct services and coordinating the city's massive response and recovery efforts.

Thousands of decisions were being made to meet the urgent needs of thousands of people at Pier 94, day in and day out, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

You see, it can be done.

When there is focus, intensity, and a sense of urgency for a shared and understood common mission.

I was also at the New York City VA Regional Office where I found dedicated and very hard working employees, but also with resigned acceptance of a system producing one and one half cases per day per rating specialist.

Our common challenge today is to instill a sense of focus and urgency, and sense of the importance of our shared mission in VBA's work force and very importantly, to provide them with the leadership, organization of work processes, and tools they need to succeed.

My expectations for this report are three-fold:

First, that it will define in terms we can all understand, why and how VA got behind the power curve in claims processing to such a degree that many veterans wait for more than 180 days for decisions on their claims;

Second, that it will describe the how and why we find ourselves grappling with a claims backlog in excess of a half-a-million claims;

And third, I expect the report to define a clear, pragmatic, and timely path to our goal of reducing claims processing to no more than 90 days and reducing the claims backlog to no more than 250,000 claims without sacrificing quality.

I told Admiral Cooper and members of the Task Force I did not want a discussion of abstract theories of veterans' benefits. I wanted practical actions I could take to improve VA's claims processing.

That has been my promise to America's veterans, and I intent to keep that promise.

I do not expect a single silver bullet to fix all our claims-processing ills. We have gotten beyond simple fixes.

The Tiger Team initiative that grew out of many discussions I have had with the Task Force to decide the oldest claims of our most senior veterans is but one example of the many steps we will take to solve VBA's larger problems.

This is a campaign that will be fought on multiple fronts with many tactics.

I will thoroughly study your report, Admiral and members of the Task Force.

I will act on your recommendations with a sense of urgency.

You promised me that you would provide me with practical hands on recommendations that I could implement immediately.

I, in turn, promised you that your report would not sit on a shelf gathering dust.

You kept your promise to me. I assure you, I will keep my promise to you.

I am inspired by Mayor Gulliani's focus and sense of urgency in responding to the crisis in New York. I will, by both example and decision, work to instill that same sense of urgency throughout the entire VA.

This report will be a bright star in the constellation of VBA reforms.

I will steer by this star and set a course for VBA to honor veterans by meeting their expectations for fair, timely, and accurate decisions and where we will fully and in good faith redeem Abraham Lincoln's promise to "care for him who shall have borne the battle..."

Again, thank you, Admiral and members of the Task Force for your very, very hard work and devotion to this task. I very much appreciate it.

**Leo S. Mackay, Jr., Ph.D.**  
**Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs**  
**Remarks at the World Peace Luncheon**  
**Birmingham, Alabama**  
**November 12, 2001**

Thank you, Senator (Jeff) Sessions (R-AL), for your kind introduction. Thank you all for that warm reception. It's an honor to be here with you in Birmingham, home of the Nation's oldest and largest Veterans Day celebration.

Today is a National day of remembrance, reflection, and celebration. It celebrates our way of life ... and the men and women who made it all possible. All that we hold dear as a free society is ours because our forebears proudly put on our country's uniform and made a commitment to stand up for all that is right ... all that is principled and decent ... all that is good about America.

These men and women, good and true, hold the respected title of *veteran*. Today we extend to them all honors of a grateful Nation.

Who is a veteran? A veteran is an ordinary, yet extraordinary, American. He is your father, grandfather, brother, uncle, neighbor, or friend. She is your grandmother, mother, sister, aunt, or colleague. He is a person who offered life's most vital years in service to his country. She is a nameless stranger who sacrificed her life so that others would not have to sacrifice theirs. He was a sword in the darkness ... She was a soldier and a savior ... They were peacemakers and peacekeepers. And they were sentry to the greatest Nation the world has ever known.

Observances, not unlike this one, are being held across America. Yet each is shrouded in the profound sadness of our National mourning for thousands of our fellow citizens — victims of terrorism, all.

Each ceremony has its beginning in 1918 — at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month, when the guns of *the war to end all wars* were silenced. But as the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, observed, "*Only the dead have seen the end of war.*"

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, Plato's words echoed to us down through the centuries ... as events left their mark on America as have few in our history. Events that transfixed our Nation as we

witnessed brutal acts of carnage against Americans and the citizens of 80 other nations — civilians ... young and old ... men, women, and children, alike. In real-time technology, we took in traumatic sights and sounds via television, video cameras, and cell phones. Each of us very personally shared in the suffering and the heroism, which were handmaidens to a National tragedy.

The relatively recent histories of conflicts like Vietnam, the Gulf War, and Somalia would lead many to believe that our Nation's wars are fought "*elsewhere*," with little affect on the day-to-day lives of those who remain at home. For all Americans, however, the war that a faceless enemy brought to our shores on September 11<sup>th</sup> irrevocably changed that perception.

Indeed, over the course of two-and-a-quarter centuries, America has been tested and tempered many times in the raging fires of war. Their names are written large across the pages of our military history— Valley Forge, Gettysburg, Belleau Wood, Pearl Harbor, Chosin Reservoir, Khe Sahn, Kuwait, to name a few.

America owes its veterans of those costly campaigns — and all who served in our Armed Services — a debt of gratitude that can never be fully repaid. Today, our flag flies proudly across the expanse of this great land because courageous Americans — veterans — reclaimed it, time and again, with the coin of suffering and sacrifice.

It has been this way since American colonists first gave their lives for the cause of freedom. Since then, our Nation's citizen-soldiers have stood unyielding in defense of democracy. The freedoms won in 1776 have been protected and preserved, generation after generation. Each has done its part ... its duty to leave as its legacy to the next, a strong and free America. As General Robert E. Lee once observed: "*Duty, then is the sublimest word in our language. Do your duty in all things ... You cannot do more. You should never wish to do less.*"

Devotion to duty has always been the hallmark of America's patriots.

Two hundred and twenty-five years ago, fifty-seven men risked their lives, their fortunes, and their honor by signing the Declaration of Independence. Its immortal words read: "*We hold these Truths to be self-evident; that all Men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.*"

These concepts have been translated into reality only through the willingness of citizens to take up arms in common defense of our Nation. We have once again seen our most basic principles threatened by people who disdain our democratic way of life. Who despise our pluralistic beliefs ... our ideals ... our values. Who believe there should be only one religion ... one people ... one way to live. They have inflicted grievous losses on our Nation and its citizens. But they cannot — and will not — prevail.

The assurance that they will fail in their efforts comes from the legacy left by 48 million citizen-soldiers — veterans — who served America so that all who live here would enjoy the rights our Founding Fathers envisioned.

We draw inspiration from the deeds and valor of those men and women who came before us — those generations of veterans who proudly carried high our flag. Be they the tattered colonials who stood defiantly on Lexington Green ... the resolute GIs who scaled the cliffs of Normandy ... or the high-tech soldiers who sped their tanks across desert sands to free a nation in the Gulf War. Throughout our history — in blood and in suffering — young Americans secured a legacy of peace and freedom for us, and for those who will come after.

Now, the torch of liberty has been passed. It is in our hands — soldier and civilian alike — its fire bright with the flames of patriotism. The warriors of today who stand at the ramparts of freedom in Southwest Asia are *the point in the spear* in what President Bush has called America's *New War*. They stand steeled for the noble fight before them ... and the torch of freedom that America's veterans carried into battle will now be their beacon above the fray.

In 1776, the American Revolutionary, Thomas Paine, wrote a pamphlet titled "*Common Sense*," in which he characterized the gritty determination of young America: "*It is not in numbers, but in unity that our great strength lies.*"

The flags and banners we see waving proudly here in Birmingham and throughout this land — on bridges and cars, in streets, store windows, and homes — measure the depth of our unity as we face a ruthless, common enemy. A foe of stealth and disguise ... an adversary who lurks, nameless, in global shadows.

As it did in Paine's time, the unity that is America springs from one cause — Freedom. The unity that is America still recognizes only three colors — the red, white, and blue of our flag. And the unity that is America draws its power and strength from the many who have become one — Americans all.

I would like to share with you the words spoken by Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, just before our Nation's entry into World War II. In a speech delivered during an "*I Am An American*" rally in New York's Central Park, he defined what it means to be free, and offered encouragement to a Nation on the eve of war. Sixty years later, I believe his words still resonate with meaning as we, too, face the challenge of conflict.

"What [is] an American? Not color, nor race, nor religion. Not the pedigree of his family, nor the place of his birth. Not the coincidence of his citizenship. Not his social status nor his bank account. Not his trade nor his profession.

*An American is one who loves justice and believes in the dignity of man. An American is one who will fight for his freedom and that of his neighbor. An American is one who will sacrifice ... in order that he and his children may retain the rights of free men.*

*An American is one in whose heart is engraved the immortal second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence: 'We hold these Truths to be self-evident ...'*

*An American is one who has always known how to fight for his rights and way of life. An American is not afraid to fight ... And he fights joyously in a just cause."*

... Remarkable words.

I submit to you that the essence of Americanism will stand long after Osama bin Laden and his band of brigands are left to history's dustbin of fanatics, despots, and tyrants.

I make that statement secure in the knowledge that the young men and women who now battle terrorism are indeed the true sons and daughters of America's veterans — those who so courageously defended us in other times ... in other wars. I have every confidence they will live up to that proud legacy in the difficult days ahead.

We, as a Nation have faced trying times before. In a Message to Congress (1862), President Lincoln wrote words that well describe the intense ordeal our Nation now faces:

*"Fellow citizens," Lincoln said, "we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves ... The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation ... We — even we here — hold the power, and bear the responsibility ... We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth."*

In this time, we too, are caught up in a "fiery trial." The *whirlwind of fire* (Milton) that engulfed the World Trade Center and the Pentagon has returned to its source and is now burning across Afghanistan. I can tell you with assurance that September 11<sup>th</sup> is going to stand out in my memory as a day when the words, "the last best hope on earth," crystallized for me our manifest mission.

Our mission — America's mission — is to reclaim the sacrifices of our fallen heroes, both military and civilian ... to shine the light of justice into the darkest corners of the world's terror-ridden back alleys ... to run to ground those who seek to destroy human liberties ... and to lift up freedom on democracy's broad shoulders.

Whether we serve in the military or as civilians, we are all soldiers in the war against terrorism. The battles in America's *New War* are just beginning — both at home and overseas. Victory may not take a familiar form, and many heroes on and off the battlefield may remain nameless.

But one thing is certain. When the fighting is done, and our sons and daughters return to us, we will, in the words inscribed on my Department's headquarters, *"care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan."*

The Department of Veterans Affairs owes its very existence to the compassion and beneficence of a grateful people. And the steadfast belief that service must be fully and justly recognized, even if it can never be fully recompensed.

Today, that promise is being reinforced and renewed. While Governor of Texas, President Bush asserted what has become a major theme of this Administration. He said: *"We must keep faith with those who have worn the uniform in the past. We must keep faith with America's veterans."*

Ladies and gentlemen, I am here to pledge to you that my Department remains unwavering in fulfilling the American people's promise ... in keeping President Bush's promise. As VA's Deputy Secretary, I am proud to help deliver that promise to you and to the men and women who proudly wear the uniforms of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard. I commit to you that we will honor their service with ours.

In the days to come, VA will be standing at the ready to serve those who have taken up the just fight before us. It is a fight we are destined to win. And win, we will, for win we must.

Our national crisis has, I know, caused each of us to consider the sanctity of our homeland, now violated.

VA has a vital role to play here as well. The VA health care system is the largest integrated system in the country, with 163 medical centers and 13,000 doctors. All of these assets stand ready to offer assistance to state and local authorities in times of crisis. In New York, for example, we've treated 98 casualties, counseled those with stress-related trauma, and served as medical backup for 3500 National Guardsmen. We are coordinating with Governor Ridge's new office, and are assisting across-the-board to bolster our country's health and medical preparedness.

President Bush has said, and said rightly, that this will be a long, hard struggle. But we have marshaled our Nation's resolute and indomitable spirit in this crisis. We will *"nobly save ... the last best hope on earth."*

America leads an international coalition of unprecedented scope and cooperation. It is an alliance of the world community. It is a partnership girding to rid the world of a new kind of foe, one who makes no distinction between the armed and the unarmed ... the defender and the defenseless. It is a union that will confirm and strengthen our heritage as the world's citadel of freedom.

On the death of President Lincoln, the American novelist Herman Melville authored a poem, which today — 136 years later — captures our Nation’s resurgence of unity ... patriotism ... and purpose in the wake of great and consuming sorrow. He wrote:

*“There is a sobbing of the strong,  
And a pall upon the land;  
But the People in their weeping  
Bare the iron hand;  
Beware the People weeping  
When they bare the iron hand.”*

When I think of Melville’s *iron hand*, I think of the great feats of America’s veterans ... their campaigns against oppression that brought hope to a world plagued by iniquity ... and their achievements, in both war and peace, which forged a Nation.

And when I think of Melville’s *iron hand*, I think of the spirit and courage of their successors — those who have taken up, and carry high, the banner of liberty and justice. I salute America’s fighting forces, which, at this very moment, are standing in harm’s way to protect that which we presume is our birthright — freedom.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen ... we will prevail.

We will do so, in part, because Americans draw inspiration from the valor of those who came before us — those generations of citizen-soldiers who built this country ... who defended it throughout our history ... and who will protect it in the centuries to come.

Veterans are living symbols of what America values and honors. Veterans have been, and continue to be the measure of our Nation’s commitment to the sacred principles of *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness*. For those who now stand on the ramparts of freedom, it remains the great and enduring deeds of veterans that bind us to America’s past ... strengthen us in the present ... and inspire us to meet, undaunted, the challenges we face as a Nation.

May God bless America’s veterans.

May God bless our Armed Forces.

May God bless the United States of America.

**Frances M. Murphy, M.D., M.P.H.**  
**Deputy Under Secretary for Health**  
**Statement Before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs**  
**Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations**  
**VA's Role in Educating Health Care Professionals to Diagnose and Treat Casualties of Weapons of Mass Destruction**

November 14, 2001

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the opportunity to testify before the subcommittee on VA's role in educating health care professionals to diagnose and treat casualties of terrorist attacks involving chemical, biological, and radiologic agents (CBR). I am accompanied today by Dr. Susan Mather, VA's Chief Public Health and Environmental Hazards Officer and Mr. Kenneth Mizrach, Director of VA's New Jersey Health Care System.

The recent incidents involving anthrax exposure and infection have made clear the possibility of an attack on the United States with unconventional weapons, including chemical, biological, or radiologic agents. Such weapons are capable of inflicting serious harm that could be both widespread and sustained.

The medical consequences of attacks of this kind include both the immediate trauma inflicted and the potential long-term health consequences resulting from that trauma. The types of trauma inflicted could include not only the more obvious physical harm the victims may suffer, but also the less visible and often unrecognized psychological trauma, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Such psychological injuries may manifest themselves only long after the event.

We believe it is of paramount importance that health care professionals throughout the nation receive the education and training that will enable them to better understand and respond to the potential health threats from such unconventional weapons. At a minimum, health care professionals should be able to:

- recognize the chemical, biological, and radiologic agents that may be used,
- identify the potential symptoms of those agents,
- provide emergency treatment where needed,

- assess and implement preventive actions that can be taken to protect victims, providers, other persons, and the treatment environment against contamination from chemical or biological agents,
- understand as fully as possible the potential long-term health consequences that may result from the use of these agents, including psychological effects,
- provide an appropriate course of follow-up treatment, supportive care, and referral,
- understand (and work with state and local public health officials in the areas of) surveillance, decontamination, quarantine, and other issues unique to care of patients exposed to weapons of mass destruction,
- understand how to seek consultative support and report suspected or actual use of these weapons, and
- understand the details of any local emergency response plan.

Since physicians (medical students, residents, and practitioners) are not the only health care professionals who would be involved in providing treatment, we strongly believe that education and training programs should be developed that are appropriate for health care professionals at various levels of their careers. All health care professionals, including, but not limited to, physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, pharmacists, emergency personnel, and health profession students should receive training.

Under Presidential Decision Directive 62, the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS), in collaboration with VA, works to ensure that adequate stockpiles of antidotes and other necessary pharmaceuticals are maintained nationwide and to train medical personnel at hospitals in the National Disaster Medical System to appropriately treat victims of CBR incidents. VA recently received \$832,000 from the Department of Health and Human Services to begin development of the training program. The first phase of this program will involve a comprehensive needs assessment of the U.S. hospitals enrolled in the NDMS and the development and piloting of the proposed training model.

VA has long provided ongoing training for health professionals to recognize and treat the victims of chemical and biological agents, but recently we have significantly enhanced our training efforts to better prepare our employees to recognize and respond appropriately to terrorist attacks. We have developed satellite broadcasts covering biological and chemical warfare issues and other educational tools and programs for those who may be charged to render care to victims of CBR incidents. I will describe some of these initiatives.

- Following the September 11 terrorist attack, we acquired educational programs from the Department of Defense (DOD) and broadcast 12 hours of instruction on biological agents and terrorism and 12 hours of instruction on chemical agents and terrorism. These programs are being broadcast repeatedly at different times of the day so as to be available to all VA employees.
- A 1-hour overview of the medical consequences of biological and chemical agents used in terrorism was first aired on October 16th. The program included expert faculty from DOD and the Department of State. It has been rebroadcast several times and at various hours to assure that all VHA clinical and administrative staff has access to it.
- A 1-hour broadcast on providing treatment for victims of exposure to radiological agents will be aired for the first time tomorrow (November 15<sup>th</sup>). It features experts on this topic from the private sector, DOD, and VA.
- We are developing a two-part broadcast on chemical agent decontamination. These broadcasts will be aired on November 20 and November 27, 2001. They will be repeated thereafter. The first broadcast will focus on how to quickly and economically establish a decontamination capability at VHA facilities. The second broadcast will focus on decontamination operations. The object of these two broadcasts is to instruct VHA facility leaders, managers, and clinicians on how to establish a decontamination capability for less than \$10,000 and in less than 30 days.
- We have developed a one-hour education program on “The Laboratory Diagnosis of Bioterrorism Agents.” This program was developed by Aileen Marty of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and will be broadcast in the near future.
- We have produced pocket cards on chemical agents and biological agents. They will help our employees identify actions to take when confronted with patients presenting after contamination. These cards are now being printed and will be available within days to all VHA clinicians and others who serve on emergency management or safety teams. A similar card on radiological agents is being developed. Additional information on responding to biological and chemical threats and on decontamination has been distributed.
- We are planning a conference on Weapons of Mass Destruction for VHA staff and clinicians and emergency managers from outside VA. This conference entitled PREPAREDNESS through PARTNERSHIP: Integrating Medical Mass Care Management in a WMD Incident will be held in St. Petersburg FL, on January 11<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup>, 2002. The conference will feature expert faculty from the United States and several other nations and will focus on HAZMAT training, clinical training for healthcare providers, and training in emergency management for managers and administrators. (This is but one example of professional conferences and exercises on emergency management and CBR that VA has sponsored or co-sponsored with DOD, the PHS, and other departments and entities.)

- We are developing an Emergency Management Academy that will include continuing medical education and continuing educational unit accredited modules in tracks targeted for clinicians, clinical leaders, health care facility managers, and emergency managers. One aspect of this academy is a web-based knowledge management site where the most current emergency management-related policies, procedures, and information, including those relevant to CBR will be posted.
- We are currently collaborating with DOD on and will co-sponsor and provide VA faculty for 12 hours of live satellite broadcasts on November 28, 29, and 30, 2001. This series, entitled “Biological and Chemical Warfare and Terrorism: Medical Issues and Response,” will be aired throughout the United States at VA and DOD facilities. It will focus on biological and chemical agents that can be used as terrorist weapons, how victims will present to healthcare facilities, appropriate care modalities and how to protect healthcare facilities and staff from contamination while providing timely and quality care. As with previous programs in the series, the program will be videotaped and made available to VA employees who were unable to view the live presentations. It will also be rebroadcast in December.

We have the capability, through our education infrastructure and our education and research cooperatives, to share the programs that we produce with others, thus creating an even better return on investment in terms of preparing the healthcare community to effectively respond to terrorist acts.

We are currently exploring the feasibility of undertaking an effort with DOD and our medical school affiliates to develop and share curriculum for undergraduate and graduate health professionals to prepare them to recognize and respond to the needs of patients who may be the victims of CBR use.

In addition, the Association of American Medical Colleges, in conjunction with other health education organizations and federal agencies including VA, has announced a bioterrorism initiative to help educate and prepare the nation’s physician workforce to respond to terrorist attacks. This initiative will focus on the need for information, resources and educational experiences to help medical students and residents deal with the victims of terrorism now and in the future.

VA is well situated to reach a wide audience of practitioners and students through its academic affiliations. VHA is extensively involved in the nationwide training of physicians, medical residents, medical students, nurses, and associated health care professionals. Through partnerships with affiliated academic institutions, VA conducts training and education programs to enhance the quality of care provided to veterans within the VA health care system. Through these long-standing and close relationships, VA also plays a leadership role in defin-

ing the education of future health care professionals to help meet the rapidly changing needs of the Nation's health care delivery system. Today, more than 150 VA facilities have affiliations with 107 medical schools, 55 dental schools, and more than 1,200 other schools across the country. More than half the physicians practicing in the United States have received part of their professional education in the VA health care system. Additionally, VA doctors conduct hundreds of research studies in conjunction with their facilities' affiliated medical schools.

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion let me state that VA is a valuable national health care resource. We stand ready to use our considerable expertise in clinical care, education, and research to benefit veterans and other Americans in this time of need.

**Robin Higgins**  
**VA Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs**  
**Keynote Address at Pearl Harbor Survivors 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**  
**The National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific**  
**Honolulu, Hawaii**  
December 7, 2001

Medal of Honor recipients Mr. Hayashi, Mr. Kellogg and Mr. Finn; Congressman Bill Young from my great state of Florida; Congressman Neil Abercrombie from the great state of Hawaii; Congressman Rodney Frelinghuysen from the great state of New Jersey; Chairman Myers; distinguished military and civilian guests; most honored members of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association; World War II veterans; and all fellow veterans and their families ... Good morning, and thank you Gene for that kind introduction.

I want to add a special acknowledgement of some special visitors with us today from New York who are here as guests of the State of Hawaii — 325 family members of men and women who were lost in the World Trade Center on September 11.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Anthony Principi, had very much hoped to be here – and were it not for extraordinary events in Washington, he would have. But he asked me to send you his best wishes. I appreciate and am humbled by the opportunity to represent him and the more than 219,000 men and women of the Department of Veterans' Affairs who stand ready to honor your service to America.

Few occasions merit words like “horrific,” “devastating,” and “tragic.” Fewer still cause a speaker to follow those superlatives with words like “magnificent,” “awesome,” or “heroic.” Yet today – as I stand here in this most sacred of places, this shrine to the sacrifices of so many honorable men and women – I am struck by the notion that what happened on this morning 60 years ago brings into play all those words and probably more.

Let me say that I do not believe we need to replay the events of that morning; I am convinced that no movie, no documentary made today, no well-meaning attempt to recreate for today's generation the horrific events of December 7, 1941, can ever do justice to what you as survivors already know...already lived through...already redeemed through your own selfless service to America.

I take my cue from the words of Abraham Lincoln who stood on the soil of a great battlefield in 1863 and said, “...we cannot dedicate – we cannot consecrate – we cannot hallow – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract.”

Here on the gentle slopes and broad fields of Puowaina, rest the heroes of another tumultuous conflict. As magnificent as any National Cemetery could be, it is but a humble gift from a grateful nation to honor those of you who stood for – and those who fell for – freedom that Sunday morning. But it does not pay the full tribute due to the sacrifices offered up on December 7<sup>th</sup>.

Pearl Harbor...NAS Kaneohe...Ford Island... Battleship Row...Hickam Field...Wheeler Field...Scofield Barracks...the Arizona... these were the grounds that were truly hallowed by your sacrifices, consecrated by your blood, and dedicated to your bravery and to the bravery of your friends and countrymen.

Your lives were forever changed by an event so devastating that it would not be for another 60 years – September 11, 2001 – that America would again feel the tragic shockwaves of an attack on our home soil.

Perhaps the events of September 11 resonated in your lives in ways that did not resonate among other, younger Americans. Having lost my husband, Marine Colonel Rich Higgins, to a violent act of terrorism 13 years ago in Lebanon, I felt the old wounds...still pink from healing...open up again when I saw the Trade Center in flames, and the Pentagon – my former duty station – torn asunder.

It is possible, then, that on September 11th, old scars of the heart and mind were once again exposed among your generation of soldiers, Marines, sailors, airmen and coastguardsmen.

But I know and you know this: these two seminal events – December 7<sup>th</sup> and September 11<sup>th</sup> – struck America hard but they did not bring her down. No terrorist – no early morning raiding party – has the power to overcome the will and determination of the American serviceman or woman.

I am reminded of a recent editorial cartoon of the Statue of Liberty in which a stern-faced Lady Liberty is cradling a child in her arms. The caption reads, “No one comes between a mother and her children.” How true that is for our Nation and for the men and women who, for 225 years, have risen in her defense in the face of the greatest personal risk.

Today is a good day to take a clear look at both our past and our future. It is a day when we acknowledge the debt we owe to those men and women who — because they so cherished peace — chose to live as warriors.

Could anything be more contradictory than a warrior’s life? Warriors love America, but they spend years on foreign soil far from home. They revere freedom, but they sacrifice their own. They defend our right to live as individuals, yet yield their individuality for the cause. They value life, yet so bravely ready themselves to die in the service of our country.

But why are some Americans so seemingly willing to fight and, if need be, to die? We fight because we believe. Not that war is good, but that sometimes it is necessary. Our soldiers fight and die not for the glory of war, but for the prize of freedom.

On that December morning, many of you took up a torch that you would not put down for four long years. You valued freedom, and you were willing to sacrifice for it.

And through your selfless sacrifices, you guaranteed a lifetime of liberty to your families, your communities, and your Nation.

It is fitting and proper, then, that those of us who've worn the uniform remember our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters — but it is crucial that we share what we feel today with those who have never taken that special risk for their country — so that they may understand.

Soldiers, Marines, sailors, airmen, coastguardsmen, World War Two Merchant Mariners and veterans understand the duty to country that causes a man or woman to risk his or her life to try to make a difference. There is nothing that can take the place of that selfless devotion.

My husband used to have a small plaque on his desk; it's on mine now and it says:

“War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things; the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. A man who has nothing for which he is willing to fight; nothing he cares about more than his own personal safety; is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free, unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.”

There is a fabric that weaves people of conscience through the ages and around the world. That fabric is bound with the moral and spiritual lineage of men and women of honor, courage and integrity; those who value something more than their own personal safety.

Bound into this fabric are the lives and loves of soldiers and their families from all times, those who came home and those who didn't and those whose fate remains unknown.

The Courts of the Missing here at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific are inscribed with the names of more than 28,000 missing soldiers, Marines, sailors, airmen and coastguardsmen whose names are held in honor along with the more than 38,000 servicemen and women who lie at sacred rest among us today.

Heroes all, they speak to us of patriots' hopes and patriots' dreams, of lives lived to the fullest measure, lives nobly offered as payment for the fabric of a free society.

It is popular today to speak of the Greatest Generation – your generation, the generation of my father, who also served in World War II – but I think the phrase ignores a basic truth about Americans.

I believe every generation of Americans has been, is, and will be, great. We all have the potential for greatness, if by greatness it is meant that in times of trial, we will meet the challenges of the times with honor, dignity, and sacrifice.

But make no mistake; let those who would terrorize us today remember the fate of those who violated our shores once before. And let the 9-11 generation carry the torch of courage and determination you carried in order to rid the world of the evil of the 21st century.

The colonists who fought for liberty in 1776, the citizens who defended a new nation in 1812, the families torn apart by Civil War, the green troops of the Allied Expeditionary Force, the 16 million men and women who wrested freedom from evil during World War II, the Korean War soldiers and their Vietnam colleagues, the young men and women of Desert Storm and, today, the troops fighting to bring terrorists to justice and justice to terrorists.

If we consider that each of these generations of Americans stood firm against the whirlwinds of tyranny to secure liberty for their times and their posterity, we must call them all great.

But the generation of the men and women who survived here 60 years ago does merit a special measure of thanks for your contributions to America.

You returned from the battlefield, put aside the tools of war, and took up the tools of industry and technology, of medicine, of science and education, and of community service. In return for all you had accomplished in war – and many of you carried the evidence of sacrifice still fresh on your bodies – you asked only to return to the peace, to the lives and loved ones you left.

And by your humble example you inspired our Nation to move forward on its path to a righteous destiny. Your contribution will not be forgotten. Your generation's greatness will be treasured and remembered.

Such a contribution should be sufficient for one generation – but I don't believe your contribution is yet complete. The next generation will need guidance...the next generation will undoubtedly face new challenges and they will wonder how to face those challenges with the courage and strength of character that is the hallmark of your generation.

I encourage our beloved World War II generation, and all our veterans, to share with your children and your grandchildren – with students and scholars and historians – the experiences of your service to America. You have a story to tell...you have thousands of stories to tell...and in the telling will be the inspiration for the next generation's response to tomorrow's challenges.

Pearl Harbor survivors specifically — have a unique perspective on this kind of brutal assault on America. You can help the rest of us better understand and come to terms with the values that are threatened and the resolve we must have to overcome our fears.

I am honored to share this day with you...and to be here in a place that speaks of the Nation's commitment to recognize the sacrifices of those patriots who were ready to give the last full measure of devotion so that we could gather in peace.

May God continue to bless our Pearl Harbor survivors, our World War II veterans, their families, indeed all our Nation's veterans and – especially today – those in harm's way. And though I might conclude by asking God to bless America, I need not. Because of you, he already has.

Thank you.